It's Complicated: Geopolitical and Strategic Dynamics in the Contemporary Middle East

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Abstract: *The Middle East is a complex system, not comprehensible through simplistic, "single factor" thinking. Global dynamics—a re-emergent multipolar power system, anti-globalism and xenophobia, the decline in U.S. willingness to lead and engage—interact corrosively with deep regional trends. The West has given up on engaging or changing the Middle East, and now wants to quarantine and wall it off. The important actors in the region today sit on its margins: Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. With Egypt and Iraq sidelined, Arab leadership is left to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who struggle with it. Washington avoids the burden of leadership, which its rivals assume, while on Palestine and Iran, has been activist and even disruptive. American policy is too focused on Iran and the Islamic State; Russia and Turkey, which may be greater challenges over the long term, are more significant and influential players in the region than the United States.*

A good part of the punditry and policy advocacy on the Middle East belongs to the school which author Philip Tetlock calls (after Isaiah Berlin) "hedgehogs": those who "know one big thing," aggressively extend the explanatory reach of that "one big thing" into new domains, and reach for formulaic solutions to ill-defined problems.[1] The current situation in the Middle East has been attributed variously to the influence of single actors or trends. The list of "big things" includes: Barack Obama, Donald Trump, George W. Bush, Mark Sykes and Francois Georges Picot, Iran, Israel and the Occupation, Vladimir Putin, the Muslim Brotherhood, the religion of Islam, the Islamic State (IS), the Shi'i-Sunni split, or democratization—just to name the most popular. While this strategy is analytically handy and neat, it is one-dimensional, and does not advance a deeper understanding of what is going on in the Middle East nor does it act as a guide for effective policy.

To use a Star Trek metaphor, the Middle East can be best visualized as a game of multi-dimensional chess: there are many things going on simultaneously, all of which

[1] Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgement*(Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 2, 73.

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influence each other. Cause and effect are intertwined. What is even more important to understand is that different actors in the Middle East are playing different games at the same time, while long-term socioeconomic and political processes shape the overall environment, and act upon all those involved.

With this overall complex situation in mind, this article seeks to present a holistic (and perhaps idiosyncratic) view of the geopolitics of the Middle East today.

The World Outside and the Middle East

The Middle East is heavily influenced by—and heavily influences—the international system. One of the key international dynamics of the past decade is the reemergence of a multipolar power system in the world. Although the United States is still the most powerful and the only truly global superpower, its relative weight has declined as that of potential rivals has risen. Russia is resurgent and seeking satisfaction for a decade (the 1990s) of perceived prostration and insult. China is beginning to translate its economic power into a regional and extra-regional strategic vision different from—and largely in competition with—that of the United States. Another dynamic is the crisis of globalism and the rise of anti-globalism among those populations and countries which see themselves as marginalized and victimized by its processes.

Both of these dynamics are simultaneously a cause and a product of a third dynamic: the melting-away of the post-war global architecture of institutions and norms, termed by some as the liberal "rule-based" international order, and the perceived decline in U.S. willingness to lead and engage with the world. This situation has created what political risk analyst and author Ian Bremmer calls the "G-Zero World," in which no single country has the power to shape a truly global agenda.[2]

Two additional global dynamics are also key to understanding the modern Middle East. The first dynamic is the techno-communication revolution and the transformation of large parts of the global market to knowledge-based economies. The Middle East (apart from Israel) is largely disconnected from the new technological and knowledge-based economy and has little to offer or engage it.

The second dynamic, and the more important one for the Middle East, is the fundamental change in the global energy market. The fragmentation of the world energy market; the rise in non-traditional, "tight" oil and gas production; the rising importance of gas vis-à-vis oil; electrification of transport; alternative energy sources; and improved energy efficiency are leading to energy abundance and changing the balance of power between consumers and producers. For example, in the last decade, the United States returned to the status of largest energy producer in the world. While the Middle East, as the home of the suppliers who can produce the most oil at the lowest price, will continue to be important in the world economy, the use of the "oil weapon" as in the 1970s is no longer a relevant scenario.[3] The Organization of the

[2] Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World* (New York: Portfolio Penguin, 2012).

[3] See, Meghan L. O'Sullivan, *Windfall: How the New Energy Abundance Upends Global Politics and Strengthens America's Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); and Llewelyn Hughes and Austin Long, "Is There an Oil Weapon? Security Implications of Changes in the Structure of

Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which produces about 40 percent of the world's oil today, is a diminished force, and oil availability and prices have shown resilience even through major crises in the Middle East. The energy revolution may have other destabilizing effects in the region, as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey all pursue nuclear energy projects for electricity generation and desalinization—and political prestige—with questionable economic justification and inherent safety and proliferation risks.[4] On a different note, the discovery of vast gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean is leading to Israeli energy self-sufficiency, as well as to potential for both collaboration and tension between Israel, Cyprus, Lebanon, and Egypt, and, secondarily, Jordan and Turkey.[5]

All of these global dynamics have direct effects on the Middle East. With other, global challenges (such as in Ukraine, the Baltics, and the South China Sea), and seemingly abundant oil and gas, there is less interest in the Middle East. The euphoria of the post-Oslo period was tamped down by the Second Intifada and the subsequent deadlock in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and the rise of Hamas to preeminence in Palestinian politics. The democratic expectations from the 2011 Arab Upheaval were drowned in blood in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Egypt. In addition, the crisis of globalism has led to the rise of nationalism and populism, shading into authoritarianism in the West. This change has been associated closely with isolationism and xenophobia.

All of these developments have coincided with the decade and a half Global War on Terror and, especially, the horrors of the Islamic State. The latter seemingly sprung from nowhere into the world's consciousness in 2014. These factors led to a strong wave of anti-Muslim sentiment—indeed, the delegitimization of Islam as a religion and a culture—throughout the non-Muslim world. Fear of radicalized refugees and immigrants eventually dominated the Western attitude towards the region. The end result? The West virtually has given up on engaging or changing the Middle East, and now wants primarily to contain, quarantine, and wall it off. Rather than the Middle East becoming more like the West, as some predicted in the past 20 years, the West is becoming more like the Middle East, as the open society model seems to be becoming less compelling.

The decline of U.S. involvement and interest in the Middle East did not start with Donald Trump or with Barack Obama. It was largely a reaction to the George W. Bush administration, when for the first time, U.S. boots were put on the ground in the Middle East for an extended period, resulting in the loss of 7,000 American lives in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Iraqi experience made the Middle East a domestic issue in the United States and soured the weary American public on engagement in a Middle

the International Oil Market," *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014/15), pp. 152–189.

[4] "Nuclear Power's Fading Moment in the Middle East," June 7, 2018, www.*worldview.stratfor.com*.

[5] Mohammed Nabil Helmi, "Mediterranean Gas Fields Spark New Tension between Egypt, Turkey," Al-Sharq al-Awsat, Feb. 8, 2018; and "Egypt & Israel's Gas Deal: Political and Security Challenges," *Le Beck Alerts*, March 5, 2018.

East that it considers an ungrateful, anti-American quagmire, less important due to the global energy revolution, and thus not worth American lives. This reality has influenced America's willingness to engage, especially militarily, in the region. The experience has discredited "nation-building," which further reinforces non-interventionist tendencies. Leaders throughout the world and the region understand that the political will for additional large-scale investments of American blood and prestige in the Middle East does not exist. Notwithstanding strong rhetoric by U.S. officials, rivals believe that the Americans can be waited out. This situation opens the way for both adventurism and locally based attempts at balancing.

Deep Trends in the Middle East

Dovetailing with these international developments is a series of deep trends common to almost all the Middle East states. The first deep trend, which has been affecting the Middle East for 20 years, is the rise of readily accessible regional media, unfiltered by regimes. This distribution occurred in phases: through satellite (al Jazeera was established in 1996), the internet, and social media. The information revolution has launched and intensified many dynamics in the region—most importantly, direct exposure to developments throughout the region and the world.

This information revolution has led to both "infection" by global trends and to increased material and social aspirations, as well as to the democratization or decentralization of information and of authority. The rise of Islamism and jihadism in this region of the world, for example, would have been inconceivable without the ability of individuals and groups to draw inspiration and instruction from outside of their immediate milieu and their local, quietist social and religious hierarchy. The cascade of revolutions in 2011 was largely a product of the development of an immediate, uncurated and self-propagating regional media universe. This exposure encouraged large numbers of citizens to feel frustration with the backwardness of their own region and with the limited opportunities of their lives, and to draw inspiration from the experience of others.

The rise of media has combined with a crisis of expectations among young, inadequately educated populations and among the middle class. There is a significant "youth bulge" in the Middle East. Population growth in the region doubled between 1980 and 2010, and 65 percent of the population of the Middle East is under the age of 30 (about 40 percent of Iraqis, for instance, were born since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003). Rapid population growth leads to ever-larger numbers of people entering the labor market. The result is that the Arab countries in 2010 had the highest youth unemployment rate in the world, at over 25 percent, with unemployment even higher among college graduates. Levels of education in the Arab world and Iran have risen to a remarkable degree in the past 30 years. However, a mismatch has developed between education and economic opportunities. Employment prospects faced by skilled and educated workers are especially weak, and higher education in the Middle East largely fails to provide skills relevant to the market's needs. This gap causes many young people to lose faith in a better future, to chafe against regime-based structural impediments and, in some cases, to drift to radical ideologies, especially in view of the lack of democratic processes which would enable them to express their dissatisfaction.

All of these trends bear significance for international politics as well. Since the U.S. presidential election in 2016, more Arab young people—in all Arab countries, but especially in the Levant—see Russia as more of an ally of their country than the United States, while a solid majority view the United States as an adversary of their country.[6]

These disturbing trends developed against the backdrop of aging, fossilized leaderships and systems, and a looming, drawn-out succession crisis. Until the upheaval of 2011, which changed the leadership in four countries—Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt— the majority of the ruling parties and dynasties in the region had been in power for 30, 40, or even more years. Most countries were governed by octogenarians; some of them either passed their leadership to their sons (in Syria) or were preparing to do so (in Egypt and Libya), in the process known in Arabic as *jumlukiya*, or hereditary republicanism.

The leaderships and their bureaucracies were no longer upholding their part of the social contract extant in the Middle East for decades: the state's provision of "political goods" such as public sector jobs, physical security (except from the state itself), free education and healthcare, infrastructure, housing, and subsidized food and fuel, in return for the political quiescence of the public, and the curtailment of rights and the acceptance of a ruling elite. The governments of these states failed to provide necessary services, and were perceived as corrupt, predatory, indifferent, and in thrall to special interest elites. These governments depended increasingly on sticks, and less on carrots, to maintain rule. The contrast between young, modernizing, aspirational populations and aged, hidebound regime systems and leaders, which had nothing to offer but personality cults, and stale state socialism, was, and still is, enormous.

Even today, the revolutionary generational dynamic remains thwarted and unfulfilled, with the exception of the countries where the regimes were toppled (and even then, it largely returned in Egypt) and Lebanon, whose quasi-democratic system does allow steam to be released and the face of the regime to be changed with popular input. Interestingly, some elections in the Arab world—Iraq, Lebanon, Tunisia—have turned from ritual non-events into displays of real political energy and, occasionally, surprise.

Another issue that is not new in the Middle East is an Islam that governs not only the private realms, but the social and political realms as well. The repression of political expression and organization, as well as institutions and organizations of secular civil society, meant that the remaining channel for expression for many individuals was through the world of faith. This expression, in many of the secular authoritarian states, expanded to become the main vehicle of opposition (and to an extent, provided a vaccination against the fear of retribution and death). When the regimes began to tremble, only the Islamist institutions provided a mass-based and well-organized political alternative. In countries where modern institutions have collapsed, traditional beliefs and structures have moved into the fore.

[6] *10 Years of Arab Youth Survey: a Decade of Hopes and Fears,* Asda'a Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey, www.arabyouthsurvey.com.

Regime Stability and the Unfinished Revolution in the Arab World

These deep trends in the Arab world, which led to a decline of traditional sources of authority, were largely hidden from view, due to the tremendous political stasis and inertia which characterized the Middle East from the 1970s to the first decade of the twenty-first century. They broke into view in Iraq after the United States proved that an Arab dictatorship could be brought down in the blink of an eye. They reappeared in the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon in 2005, when popular demonstrations in Lebanon brought on the sudden end of the 30-year Syrian presence in Lebanon, as well as in the Green Movement in Iran in 2009. But they were most prominently exposed after the self-immolation of Mohamad Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, which was the catalyst of the Arab Upheaval of 2011.

Things started happening in the Middle East which had not moved, or moved glacially, for 30 or more years. The "fear hurdle"—the fear of devastating and wide-ranging punishment by an enraged security state of challenges from below—had cracked, as the security state was largely swamped by the scope of the unrest. There was no more status quo in the Arab world. Without this event, Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi might still be in power, and the Syrian civil war may not have occurred. Popular rebellion and unrest are contagious, as the events of 2011, as well as 1848, 1917-1919, 1968, 1989, and the color revolutions of 1998-2005 illustrate.

Bashar al-Assad had a choice in 2011. He decided he would rather be Gaddafi than Mubarak or Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. He would rather go down like a lion than like a sheep. For a long time, it appeared that he would fail. But he did not, thanks to changes in Western perceptions of the Syrian crisis. What was initially perceived as a post-2011 popular uprising against a corrupt and brutal dictator evolved into a counterrevolutionary war by the regime against its own people and then into a war against the Islamic State.

For a while, these latter two conflicts ran concurrently, on much the same territory, with little spillover. An international coalition was attacking IS, while Assad, aided to a large extent by Hezbollah and Iran and later by Russia, was trying to put his house in order against the non-IS rebels. One result was the significant lessening of international pressure on Assad, who was increasingly viewed as the lesser of two evils. The focus was placed on counterterrorism and the emphasis on stability (as a hedge against Islamist inundation of the West). The Islamic State (and the "Shii" threat) enabled the authoritarians in the region to portray themselves as besieged and to tar their internal opponents as jihadis (including as part of the region-wide delegitimization of the Muslim Brotherhood) or Iranian proxies. This rhetorical strategy delegitimized and smothered the popular and democratizing elements of the Arab Spring. As Marc Lynch of George Washington University writes, "The uprisings did not fail because Arabs were not ready for democracy or because Islamists cunningly exploited the naivete of hopeful liberals. The Arab uprising failed primarily because the regimes they challenged, killed it."[7]

[7] Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprising and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p. xviii.

Power Politics in the Middle East and the New Cold Wars

The interaction of the previously mentioned global and regional trends, with developments on the ground, generate the current power balance in the Middle East. One interesting characteristic is that the most significant movers and shakers in the Middle East today are virtually all non-Arab actors on the margins of the Arab world: Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel.

Russia saw an opportunity and seized it.[8] It has been expanding its efforts to gain influence in the Middle East, pursuing its traditional goals of pacifying its southern flank and creating and expanding fissures in the U.S. strategic architecture in the Middle East. Russia accomplishes this strategy by reaching out to traditional U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia, other Gulf States, Egypt, Turkey, and even Israel. It tries to convince them that, in the new world order, there is no longer one superpower and that it is wise to hedge their bets. The more stable Middle East states, shaken by their experience with the Obama administration and unsure of the long-term stability of U.S. involvement in the region, were looking for a plan B, and Russia may fit the bill. As Nikolas Gvosdev of the U.S. Naval War College points out, they see Moscow as an important restraining force on the impetuousness of Iran, as the likely guarantor of any Syria settlement, and as a proponent of the concept of "good old-fashioned" spheres of influence, which is close to their own strategies today.[9] The intense rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran affords yet another gain for Russia: it has become much more central to the regional and international economy, as Riyadh's partner in trying to stabilize the production and thus, price, of oil. In its strategic positioning, Moscow compensates for its continued and long-term economic and demographic weakness by making maximum use of its comparative advantages, most importantly, its military force and élan, wielded confidently, and decisively by a strong and single-minded state. The Kremlin also lacks interest in the domestic policies and humanitarian hygiene of its interlocutors, but it can offer the prospect of civilian nuclear assistance and access to its sophisticated weapons systems. Iran has increased its regional influence over the 15 years since the United States removed Saddam Hussein, thus realigning, for the time being, the regional balance of power in favor of Iran. It has done so through its intensive involvement in Iraq and Syria (its predominant influence over Lebanon, through Hezbollah, predates all this), as well as, until this year, the significant steps towards international normalization engendered by the nuclear deal with the major powers.

Tehran, with its tentacles throughout the region, has enjoyed significant gains both regionally and internationally. In cooperation with Russia, Iran has aided Assad's

[8] This was the second time they had done so. Moscow's reemergence as a major player in the Middle East actually began in September 2013, when Russia stepped in to solve the looming crisis over Syrian use of chemical weapons, quickly and effectively putting into place for Syria's (ostensible) disarmament from chemical weapons, and stealing a march on what looked like a prevaricating U.S. administration.

[9] Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "The 1980s Called, and They Want Their Russian Sanctions Back," *The Federalist,* Aug. 8, 2017.

re-conquest of much of Syria, utilizing Russian air and other assets and tens of thousands of proxy troops from Hezbollah and Shi'i Iraqi and Afghan militias (thus also deriving benefit from years of previous investment). Its military nuclear ambitions, key to its long-range goal of becoming a major, invulnerable regional power, appear to have been postponed, not abandoned.

Nevertheless, Iran is not on the cusp of regional hegemony. Its weak position is due in part to the intrinsic limitations of its broader appeal, as a non-Arab, Shi'i power. Most of its closest confederates are non-state or sub-state actors (Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, Iraqi militias and parties), with only one state—Syria—being a full-fledged ally. Iran has also become the target of a regional coalition, strongly supported by the United States, which sees Tehran as the source of instability in the region, and its containment and rollback as the key to re-pacifying the region. The most significant recent development is, of course, the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This action has contributed mightily to economic crisis in Iran, illustrated by the collapse of the rial, which has led to popular dissatisfaction internally, expressed both "on the streets" and in the internal political sphere, as well as criticism of the regime. Iran's adventurism abroad has been one of the overt targets of the popular criticism.

In the past decade, Turkey has strongly shifted its focus away from Europe and NATO towards becoming a major independent power in the Middle East. This move was in part due to its understanding that its hopes for accession to the European Union were illusory and to its ire at the United States after the April 2016 coup attempt, which Turkish officials have accused the United States of abetting. It was also due to (so far unrealized) expectations that it could serve as a model for emerging regimes in the wake of the Arab Uprising, as well as ideological affinity and protectiveness towards likeminded players in the region, such as Qatar, Hamas, and the late Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt.

Turkey is also becoming steadily more authoritarian, a tendency which promotes its developing significant political and military cooperation with Russia. In the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government was firmly supportive of the Syrian opposition and condemnatory of Assad's regime. Turkey's position on the conflict has evolved, as the Russian intervention reversed the tide and brought the Assad regime close to victory, and as Kurdish groups—supported by the United States—gained more prominence and power as the most effective Syrian force against the Islamic State, raising latent fears in Turkey of possible Kurdish irredentism. Ankara is gaining hard power in the Middle East. It now has a military presence in Syria, Qatar—where it stationed a force ostensibly to deter Saudi aggression—Somalia, and Sudan, where it is heavily involved in major infrastructure projects, has signed a military cooperation agreement, and is redeveloping Suakhin Island, a former Ottoman naval base.[10]

Thus, Russia, Iran, and Turkey—the "Astana trio," after the name of the Syrian reconciliation process they lead—are involved in a complex triangle of

[10] Saudi Arabia and UAE, often termed "little Sparta," are also building up a military and commercial presence in the Horn of Africa. David Brewster, "With Eyes on the Indian Ocean, New Players Rush into the Horn of Africa," *War On The Rocks*, Feb. 7, 2018.

complementary and contradictory interests and goals in Syria, but until now have been largely operating in mutually enforcing directions. This may now be changing, as the achievement of the overall goal of the survival of the Assad regime (Tehran and Moscow) and the dampening of destabilizing anarchy in Syria (Ankara and Moscow), leads to an end game where the centrifugal overpowers the centripetal forces among the three. For instance, Iran's desire to retain forces and influence in Syria conflicts with Russia's wish to regularize and stabilize the new regional architecture it has constructed to preserve its strategic interests (naval and air bases, a friendly regime, relations with Israel, and the image of a strong, virile, and decisive power). Iran and Turkey each see Syria as part of their strategic space and are each trying to create a strategic architecture which serves their long-range interests; these may well not coincide.

Israel, for its part, primarily is playing defense, and defensive offence, against the expansion of Iranian influence towards its borders, and to prevent a "Shi'i land-bridge" from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean. It does this by the direct use of military force and by engaging Russia and the United States, in an attempt to limit and shape the contours of Hezbollah and Iranian presence in Syria. It does so also through circumspect cooperation with the anti-Shi'i camp in the Arab world. The relationship between Israel and the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, has developed over the last years and is based on interests, not values. These relations are based on three main components: concern about Iran, especially about its increasingly intensive and successful regional activity; concern about the future of the American engagement with the Middle East; and the perceived need for conservative regional players to develop a robust reply to regional challenges, using their own leadership and resources. A key accelerant to good Saudi relations with Israel is the Trump administration, which is very supportive of them. Israel also acts to prevent Sunni jihadi threats on its borders by creating an anti-IS constellation of local forces on the margins of the Golan Heights and by collaborating covertly with Egypt in carrying out operations, including drone strikes, against the IS-affiliated Wilayat Sinai.[11]

Jerusalem is attempting to use these convergences of threat perceptions, interests, and policies to reshape regional dynamics, decoupling them from their knee-jerk connection to the Palestinian issue. It is aided in this attempt by the intractability of the intra-Palestinian political crisis, which has so far overcome one "historic reconciliation" between Fatah and Hamas after another. In addition, there is the perception by pluralities in the Israeli and Palestinian publics—and by political elites in the region—that peace between them is desirable, but unachievable at the current time, due to each side's despair from the other's leadership. However, it is worth remembering that strategic relationships between Israel and Arab regimes thrive best out of sunlight and that the past year has seen great exposure of these ties. Arab publics think less in realpolitik terms than their leaders, which will create future domestic tensions.

[11] David D. Kirkpatrick, "Secret Alliance: Israel Carries Out Airstrikes in Egypt, With Cairo's O.K," *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2018.

Israel also is making strenuous efforts to position itself as an influential actor outside of the narrow Middle East context. It stresses the creation of an Eastern Mediterranean Alliance with Greece and Cyprus, aimed *inter alia* at Turkey. It has good ties with Russia and China and has developed a strategic relationship with India. The Benjamin Netanyahu government is also ideologically "in tune" with the nationalist-populist wave in the United States and Europe and uses it to garner support for its stances and policies and to cement a more positive international, or at least inter-governmental, position.

The leading external actor, the United States, is playing a confused and confusing role. A perception that American policy was weak, both under Barack Obama and at the beginning of the Trump administration, helped embolden Russian and Iranian attempts to gain influence, stature, and "victory of narratives" by engagement in Syria. After the fall—in conservative Arab and American idiom, "betrayal"—of Hosni Mubarak, suspicion also grew among Washington's traditional allies in the region that the United States would not be there when they needed it. Russia's intervention in Syria to protect a client regime contrasted sharply with American unwillingness to do the same for its allies.[12]

More recently, President Donald Trump's Middle East policy has been in some key ways, minimalist. For instance, the recognition of Russia as a global rival and even threat, reflected in the 2018 National Security and National Defense Strategies, does not impact on Washington's acquiescence to Moscow's active roles in Syria and Libya and the more general increase in its ties and influence among U.S. allies in the region. On many issues, Trump and his policies illustrate apparent unwillingness to shoulder the burden of leadership, which is being taken up by rival powers. A striking illustration is his interview with *Reuters* on August 20, in which he said, *inter alia*, "We never should have been in the Middle East. It was the single greatest mistake in the history of our country." In other issues, the administration's policies have been activist and even "disruptive." The key issues in which the administration has been active, in which it has also broken sharply with the policy of its predecessor, have been Palestine and Iran. These issues are connected: in both the Palestinian and Iranian issues, the administration's position is close to those of the Republican right and the Israeli government. The White House also affords a significant role to Saudi Arabia as the leader of a notional "moderate Sunni Camp," a policy component which may be challenged by fallout from the Khashoggi affair.

One major global player that has not weighed in yet on the Middle East is China. Its Belt and Road Initiative, which serves to promote its neo-mercantilist worldview and goals, touches on the margins of the Middle East. International sanctions on Iran in the past also displaced much Iranian economic activity to the Far East. Today, China is Iran's largest import and export market, and the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA may reinvigorate this trend, especially since Chinese firms are less vulnerable to U.S. sanctions (since they do not use the U.S. financial system). In addition, China seems to be positioning itself to take a major role in reconstruction

[12] O'Sullivan quotes the leader of a Gulf Country as saying to her in 2016: "Now Putin - he knows how to be an ally!," p. 196.

projects in Syria in the future.[13] Its renminbi (currency) diplomacy and establishment of a military base in Djibouti do seem to indicate that it is preparing to play a "long game" in the region.

The Arab "Great Game"

The Arab Spring divided the Arab world into two camps, which are engaged in warm and hot wars in Yemen, Syria, and, to an extent, Libya. This division is superimposed over the older Saudi-Iranian divide—which can be seen through both a sectarian-religious lens and a realist-balance of power one—to encompass most of the Arab world, either as participants or as battlegrounds. Bassel Salloukh of Lebanese American University, Beirut, notes that:

> Saudi Arabia's deployment of sectarianism to achieve what are otherwise geopolitical objectives, before as well as after the popular uprisings, and Iran's use of sectarianism to mobilize its regional proxies in defense of its geopolitical allies, magnified the sectarian dimension of these conflicts in which other divisions have always been equally if not more important and class or regional divisions often overlapped with sectarian cleavages.[14]

The conservative camp led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (which, as noted above, largely share goals with Israel) defines itself predominantly by its opposition to Iranian ("Shi'i") adventurism and Muslim Brotherhood activity. The main driver for this alignment is ensuring survival and security of non-representative regimes against external threats and against change from below. The other camp (which sometimes refers to itself as "the Resistance," a term which ostensibly defines it by its shared opposition to Israel) consists of Iran, Hezbollah (and other weaponized Shi'i militias), Hamas, the Assad regime, and Qatar and is currently associated with Turkey. Turkish analyst Galip Dalay notes:

> Because the Saudi-Emirati partnership sees Turkey and regional political Islamic movements through the same lens, Ankara regards the Gulf Arab states' search for a new regional order as directly or indirectly targeting Turkey and its interests, . . . Ultimately, while Saudi Arabia and Israel view Iran as an existential threat that they must confront, Ankara sees Tehran as a regional rival and neighbour with which it should compete and, at times, cooperate.[15]

[13] Thomas J. Shattuck, "China's Syria Strategy: Beijing Prepares to Take the Reins," *Al-Majalla*, Jan. 26, 2018.
[14] Bassel Salloukh, "Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State," *International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East*, POMEPS Studies 16 (2015), pp. 47-51.
[15] "Turkey" in *the Middle East's New Battle Lines*. European Council on Foreign Relations. May 2018. http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/turkey#menuarea.

The balance of success between the two camps was much affected by the Russian intervention in Syria, which added significant weight in favor of the "Iranian" camp, as well the ill-conceived Saudi economic war on Qatar, which strengthened and operationalized the Ankara-Doha axis, as well as Qatar's ties to Iran. This camp acts in a unified manner, largely controlled from Tehran, unlike the rival camp, which is not a unified actor, partially because of its weak lynchpin—Saudi Arabia—and a lack of congruence between the interests and agendas among its members.[16] On the other hand, Washington's withdrawal from the JCPOA and the Trump administration's full-throated positioning of itself in the anti-Iranian (even regime change) camp have energized the anti-Iran camp and internationalized the competition, even if the actual operational implications, in terms of resources and willingness to use force, remain unclear.

Neither of the two historic poles of power in the Arab world—Cairo and Baghdad—is playing their traditional roles in the current inter-Arab conflict. Egypt is consumed by domestic concerns. It is associated with Saudi Arabia and UAE, due to its conservatism and need for financial support. However, it is not fully committed to their activist anti-Iranian agenda: it demurred on sending troops to Yemen, and currently supports the Assad regime. It seems more concerned with its immediate neighborhood, including covert military cooperation with Israel against IS affiliates in Sinai, involvement alongside the Russians in Libya, and the crisis with Ethiopia regarding that country's project to dam the headwaters of the Nile River, which has drawn Sudan, whose close new allies are Qatar and Turkey, on the Ethiopian side, and UAE and Eritrea on the Egyptian one. Iraq, for its part, is still emerging from its series of civil wars, and still largely dominated by Iran, though the equation of Iraqi and Iranian Shi'a Islam is imprecise and misleading. Egypt today is mostly an object, rather than a player, in regional dynamics.

This leaves the Saudis and Emiratis—or more precisely, their young Crown Princes, Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) and Mohammad bin Zaed (MbZ)—to do the "heavy lifting" of leading the conservative Arab world. But the princes are inexperienced, and the Kingdom lacks key elements of national power, capacity, and acumen. Note the lack of foreign policy success in Yemen, Qatar, and Lebanon. MbS continues to encounter obstacles in pursuing his ambitious plans to use controlled economic and social reform to recast the kingdom in his image expeditiously while maintaining absolute political control. He is said to admire what is termed the Chinese model. His year of rule has been characterized by missteps (the internment of Saudi princes and wealthy citizens and the extortion of funds from them; persecution of activists; severing diplomatic relations with Canada). The most recent and serious of which was the murder of oppositionist journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, and subsequent attempts to deny involvement and then shift blame. It would appear that the market is losing confidence in the "magic touch" of the crown prince: the Saudis have retreated from plans to make a public offering for shares in the national oil company Aramco, in light of weak market interest, reflecting the collapse of a central pillar of MbS's "Vision 2030." Foreign and local investment seems to be flooding out.

[16] See, Joshua Krasna, "The Moderate Sunni Camp: Does It Really Exist?," JISS Papers, Oct. 25, 2018. https://jiss.org.il/en/krasna-the-moderate-sunni-camp-does-it-really-exist/.

Then, there are the losers. The first group, of course, are those who were unfortunate enough to live in the lands where the bad old order collapsed, a stable new order has not formed, and the new Arab Wars are being fought (Syria, Yemen, and Libya, as well as, earlier, Iraq). Three-quarters of Yemen's 28 million people now require food relief, 1 million people suffer from cholera, and more than 50,000 children reportedly died just last year from starvation or other causes.[17] Enormous refugee flows have become a region-wide phenomenon. About 13 million out of approximately 18 million Syrians are displaced, with about half of those outside Syria. While the flow of refugees from the Middle East has radicalized Western politics, contributing to the rise of right-wing populism that also had economic and cultural roots as a backlash against globalization even in countries which have barely been affected by the phenomenon (such as the United States and Great Britain), the vast majority of Syrian refugees have ended up in neighboring countries. There are more than three million in Turkey, a million in Lebanon, a million or so in Jordan, and sizable numbers in Iraq, Egypt, and Libya.

Second, as mentioned earlier, are the masses and individuals, who thought their lot would improve due to the Arab Uprising. And third are the Kurds. The conflict in Syria is, in part, the Kurdish war for liberation, or at least autonomy. The Kurds were the lynchpin of the U.S. coalition effort against the jihadists, and liberated not only their own areas, but others as well. As strategic expert Dominic Tierney notes, "U.S. officials embraced a 'Kurds versus ISIS' model of the war."[18] The Assad regime was to a large extent indifferent to, or even supportive, of their activity. However, with the decline of the IS caliphate, and the apparent survival and recuperation of the regime, narrower national interests are beginning to reassert themselves. The victorious Kurdish forces, allies of the United States, are now the target of military and political action by Turkey. A nominal U.S. ally, Ankara views Syrian Kurdish forces as allies of Kurdish terrorists inside Turkey and a self-governing Kurdish zone on its southern border as an existential threat to its territorial integrity. To contain Kurdish ambitions, Turkey needs to cooperate with the other countries perceiving a similar threat: Syria, Iran, and Iraq (whose territory the Turks have also recently entered, apparently with the acquiescence of the Iraqi Kurds).

Seeking a Better, More Realistic Policy

Most actors outside the region view the Middle East through a narrow security lens, focused on containing terror, Islamist radicalism, and migration. It is also viewed, inside the region and outside, in an increasingly binary fashion: radical-conservative, overlapping with sectarian Shi'i-Sunni. As Marc Lynch notes, however, there are at least four different, overlapping lines of conflict: the Iranian-Saudi conflict (which to an extent melds with the Israeli-Iranian one); the battle for leadership of the Sunni

[17] Stephen Walt, "Trump's America is the Safest Country in the World," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2018.
[18] Dominic Tierney, "A Weary Hercules: The United States and the Fertile Crescent in a Post-Caliphate Era", Orbis, vol. 62, issue 3 (Summer 2018).

Arab world among Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey, shaped by the weakness of Egypt and Iraq; the broader struggle between autocratic regimes and mobilized societies; and the challenge posed by transnational (mostly Sunni) Islamist networks (political or jihadi).[19]

To these factors must be added the new component of muscular Russian foreign policy and interventionism, as well as competition between the West and Russia. These dynamics are also shaped by broader trends and developments both outside and inside the region, and of course by the history, structure, and internal dynamics of each Middle Eastern state, which substantially affect developments within it and in its external relations.

Understanding these crosscutting dynamics leads to certain conclusions about the direction of current American policy in the Middle East. The National Security Strategy issued by the White House in December 2017 laid out the broad goals of U.S. policy under the Trump administration: "The United States seeks a Middle East that is not a safe haven or breeding ground for jihadist terrorists, not dominated by any power hostile to the United States [namely Iran], and that contributes to a stable global energy market."[20] It is noteworthy that two of these goals are negative and that the third refers to continuation of a current trend.

On the one hand, current U.S. policy and activity is aimed at the military defeat of radical jihadi groups and rolling back Iranian influence and power, ultimately weakening the Iranian regime. On the other hand, the U.S. administration is wary of a major military commitment, especially of ground forces, in the region. It strives to resolve these contradictions by means of stand-off strategic assets (as in the strikes on Syrian chemical installations) and through strong backing of the anti-Iranian camp in the Arab world, especially the Saudi and Emirati Crown Princes, as well as the *de facto* alliance of this camp with Israel.

Iran, paradoxically, may not necessarily be ill-served by this policy. It is presented as the prime mover of developments in the Middle East and a rival of the world's strongest state. Thanks to the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA, it is also able to portray itself as a responsible international actor, committed to international agreements and legitimacy, in contrast to the internationally unpopular American president. The renewed U.S. pressure on Tehran has mixed effects: on the one hand, it is already having serious economic repercussions in Iran and may be stoking existing dissatisfaction. This probably will only get worse, as international corporations curtail ties with Iran in fear of new U.S. sanctions. On the other, the sanctions, widely viewed as unwarranted and arbitrary, may strengthen Iranian nationalism and anti-Americanism and cause a "rally round the flag" effect.

U.S. policy in the Middle East is too focused on Iran and the Islamic State. The West must counter Iran's regional activity, especially that which directly and truly threatens key regional allies, and continually monitor and challenge its missile and

[19] Mark Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprising and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p. 44.
[20] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

nuclear activity. But Iran is not the cause of all, or even most, of the problems in the Middle East. U.S. policy today does little to address, or even acknowledge, the other challenges outlined above, including: the interrupted popular revolutions in the Arab world, the crisis of expectations of a growing young cohort which is leaning towards anti-Americanism, the continued crisis of legitimacy of Arab leaderships, and the breaking of the "fear barrier" which prevented Arab publics from challenging their leaderships. The United States, among many other countries, missed the explosiveness of these trends before 2011 and is largely ignoring them now.

While Washington at present wishes to contain, rather than engage, the Middle East and to base policy predominantly on military and other coercive steps to contain and defeat specific enemies, this is a chimera. The Middle East has a way of surprising those who try to ignore it. For example, Europe has been the victim of increasing terrorist attacks, which are not directed from within the Middle East, but are influenced by developments and ideologies in it. Second, the continuing deterioration of the situations in Syria, Libya, and Yemen are creating humanitarian catastrophes, which cause ever-greater suffering and create more and more refugees and migrants to the West. These, in a vicious cycle, feed isolationism as well as populist, authoritarian, and anti-Muslim tendencies in the West, which deepens the tension between it and one quarter of the world's population (projected to rise to a third in the second half of this century).[21] Recent developments within the United States (such as the "Muslim ban" and increasing expressions in the political realm of hostility towards Islam as a religion[22]) cannot help but affect how it is perceived in the Middle East.

The United States is doing too much on some issues, and too little on others. It has wearied of civil society promotion, capacity building, and counter-radicalization, so it has largely abandoned them. Many in the current administration do not believe in them on first principles. The United States risks being seen as irrelevant, or worse, as antithetical (due to its wholehearted embrace of the conservative camp and its narrative) to the deeper trends in the region.

In addition, American policy since at least 2013 has led to a situation where Russia and Turkey are much more significant and respected players in the region than the United States. This is almost, but not quite, incomprehensible. In a competition for the allegiance of authoritarian, conservative players in the region, authoritarian powers, untrammeled by democratic political processes and values and able to pursue long-term strategies, may always hold the stronger cards. The United States has concentrated on two actors as the main threats and has ignored two which may be more challenging to its wider interests over the long term.

U.S. policy requires much more input by people who know the Middle East well and by "foxes" in Tetlock's jargon, who "know many little things," drawn from a deep and eclectic array of perspectives and disciplines, and accept ambiguity and

[21] Michael Lipka and Conrad Hackett, "Why Muslims are the World's Fastest-Growing Religious Group," *Fact Tank—Our Lives in Numbers,* Pew Research Center, April 6, 2017.
[22] See, e.g., Abigail Hauslohner, "New NSC Chief of Staff is from Group That Believes Muslims are Plotting to Take Over U.S.," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2018.

contradictions as inherent features of life, rather than by "hedgehogs."[23] It requires that force-based policy, a default mode of the current administration, be accompanied by the disparaged tools of expertise, diplomacy, and soft power. This means making much better use of the sources of real knowledge which exist, whether in the intelligence community, the State Department, the military, or outside government, and not only of the closed circle of untested Middle East policymakers surrounding the president, and of the simplistic and ideological commentariat. Such "foxes" might perform, *inter alia*, the important function of mitigating the expectations that any specific policy or bundle of policies will have a decisive effect and flagging the probability of displacement effects and unexpected consequences. That would certainly make for better and more realistic policy, in this confused and confusing part of the world.

[23] Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgement*, p. 2.